

Demystifying the Feminine Self

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Abstract : The present paper entitled “Demystifying the feminine self.” attempts to redefine women empowerment by analyzing issues like gender disparity, violence against women, role of NGO’s in empowering women and education as central to the empowerment process. Women empowerment is looked at as a process of which women gain greater control over material assets and intellectual resources, thereby challenging the ideology of patriarchy and gender based discrimination against women in all institutions and structures of society. A reference is made to the feminist movement and feminist critics like Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter and Tillie Olsen who examines the experiences of women from all races and cultures and demands that women’s voices must be heard. The paper also dwells on how feminist critics expose patriarchal premises and re-evaluate literature. An attempt has been made to highlight contemporary concerns of women empowerment where education is central to the process of empowerment which seeks to build a critical consciousness, analytical thinking and the knowledge and skills to act for change. Education can bring about a qualitative change in the life of a woman and empowers her in a real sense by making her economically self-reliant and socially aware of her own dignified existence. The whole process of women empowerment is vested in the cycle of power and control. Men’s tyrannical hegemony is deep rooted in our society and the pervasive concept of ‘power’ in our society is male dominance. The power mechanism which governs every relation between men and women is established as the root cause of all the problems associated with women. Therefore, measures to deconstruct this notion of power are bought like sensitizing men in our patriarchal society and by creating a separate ‘time and space’ for women to collectively and critically re-examining their lives. The role of civil society in empowering women is discussed as it is the social structure that compels women to subordination, subservience and dependence on men and they are trapped in the net of relationships. A reference is also made to the protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 which recognizes domestic violence as a punishable offence and is discussed as an important impediment in the empowerment process, highlighting the issues of silent victims. The liberated selfhood of the emerging women of today is discussed with an objective to promote a cultural shift.

Keywords: Demystifying, patriarchy, hegemony, deconstruction, sensitize, cultural-shift, victim, victimizer, colonization

I. INTRODUCTION

The myriad roles to which we associate a woman are abundant and so are the challenges faced and conquered by her. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over few decades. From equal status with men

in the ancient times to the present struggle for equality the history of women has been eventful. In the Rig-Veda period women participated in all spheres of life, were appreciated and highly respected by each and every member of the society. The position of women deteriorated in the later Vedic period when they were denied the right of inheritance and ownership of property. The condition of women worsened in the Gupta period when social evils like dowry system gained grounds and emerged as an institution. In the medieval period child marriages, widow remarriages female infanticide and sati system evolved as other evils afflicting the position and condition of women in the society. Later gender discrimination, illiteracy and innumerable superstitious beliefs added to the woes of women. It was in the beginning of the nineteenth century that social activists and reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chand Vidya Sagar campaigned against issues like sati and child marriage. The British also took stern steps to abolish such social evils and many laws were enacted to safeguard the interest of women. Indian women has demonstrated exceptional courage and leadership qualities like Rani Jhansi, Rajia Sultan, Indira Gandhi whose success stories empower the women of today to fight with all odds in the society. In the present-day world women have gained more strength, more confidence in their own potential and are adapting the “acquisitive culture where everything seems inadequate and insufficient” (Sandhu, Nirmal. The Tribune) this newly acquired self-realization in the pursuit of happiness and freedom can be termed as a true picture of empowered women. The empowerment process has begun and the roots of the process lies in the consciousness brought about through education and by the economic independence achieved by the women of today.

Women empowerment is a process which implies a societal mindset which honors women and seeks to build a critical consciousness through knowledge to act for change. The empowerment process must begin by creating a separate time and space for women to collectively and critically re-examine their lives. As a process it must aim to develop a new perception and awareness among women and to streamline various social issues which act as obstacles in the empowerment process. This awareness leading to greater participation, effective decision making power, financial freedom, political space and mobility to securing equal rights and opportunities, making a transition from oppression to empowerment can be termed as women empowerment. Crowther defines women empowerment in relation to this transition when he says that empowerment means “...to give somebody the power or authority to act” (Antony ,27)

We therefore, refers to the power within by which women gain power to regulate their day to day lives in the social, economic and political terms, a power which enables them to move from the periphery to the centre stage. The empowerment process tackles both the condition and position of women in society. As the outcome of the process women secure control over material assets and intellectual resources, thereby challenging the ideology of patriarchy and the gender based discrimination against women in all institutions and structures of society. Empowerment thus becomes a visible manifestation of a change in society, ‘a cultural shift’ which the world around us is forced to acknowledge. David Willets, former Minister for Universities in the UK once remarked that a new generation of sit-at-home fathers had come into being with women increasingly overtaking men in education and at workplace.

II. FEMINISM AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Beside empowerment, feminism also has close association with the empowering process. Feminist thinkers believe that all movements which work to obtain women's rights should be considered as feminist movements. The earlier proponents of the movement are labeled as ‘protofeminists’ who are concerned with basic issues related to women. The feminist movement is divided into three “waves” (Heimm, 251) each one dealing with a different aspect of the feminist concerns. The first wave refers to the nineteenth and early twentieth century period which mainly dealt with suffrage, working conditions and educational rights of women and girls. The second wave of feminism refers to the nineteen sixties and eighties which was concerned with the inequality of laws, cultural inequalities and the role of women in society. The third wave of feminism, which started as a movement in late 1980’s and early twenty first century is largely a continuation of the second wave of the feminist movement.

In India feminism broadly aims at “defining, establishing and defending equal political, economical and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women” (Webster, online edition). Feminists in India strive for gender equality, an issue which is very much important for women empowerment, and other culture-specific issues within India’s patriarchal society like men’s hegemony, inheritance law, gender discrimination, sati and child marriages. Due to socio-cultural differences feminism in India developed on different grounds. Empowering women and the idea of self are the primary concerns which are debated at length as both rests on self-reliance and individual identity. The idea of self is central to women empowerment as well, as empowering begins in the mind set of an individual and it is the individual identity which is targeted when we talk of various atrocities inflicted on women. Women empowerment is a struggle to regain the lost self which is subdued and subjugated by the society. The feminists through their movement try to reach out individuals and examine the marginalized section of women. Post-modern feminists argue that sex and gender are socially constructed and relates women’s experience of inequality to racism and classism.

Among notable Indian feminists some are worth quoting for indispensable work in empowering women through their efforts. Sarla Devi Chaudharain was one of the earliest feminist and founder of the Bharat Stree Mahamandal, one

of the first women’s organization in India ; Mira Datta Gupta, an activist for women’s issues and one of the founding members of the All India Women’s conference ; Brinda Karat, first women member of the CPI(M), politburo and former vice president of the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) Vina Mazumdar secretary of the first committee on the status of women in India and founding Director of Centre for Women’s Development Studies.(CWDS). The issues and concerns undertaken by these feminist women are directly in relation to the process of women empowerment, be it the issue of passing the Women’s reservation bill or the grand old lady Vina Mazumdar’s complex and double role of reformist and rebel who fought for injustices done against women.

Kate Millet, a feminist wrote in her book *Sexual politics* that ‘the essence of politics is power’ and the power structure that operates our society is deeply rooted in the patriarchal system. Feminism is concerned with the marginalization of women that is their being relegated to a secondary position. The notion of otherness associated with women needs to be deconstructed and discarded altogether.

The most fundamental and pervasive concept of power in our society is male oppression and male dominance. Experiences show that men’s tyrannical hegemony is strong and deep rooted to allow for any change in the society. Millet distinguishes between sex as biologically determined and “gender as psychological concept that refers to culturally acquired sexual identity” (Gurein, 199). The battle of sexes raises issues of inequality between men and women and of discrimination and oppression against women. The so called inferior sex is always at fight for a respectable position in society. Feminists like Elain Showalter, Kate Millet examine the female self and their analyses of literature are focused on how male fears and anxieties were portrayed through female characters. They consider texts as models of power.

The Feminist Mystic by Betty Frieden demystifies the dominant image of American suburban housewife and mother. Through her book she gave a call to put an end to sex discrimination and endorsed upon the enforcement of equal rights for women. Millet interpreted works of D.H.Lawrence, Norman Mailer as a challenge to violence against women, crude sexuality and male power. She believes that the work of such writers operates on the patterns of submission and dominance of female characters. This is what she terms as : “..interior colonization” of women by men [which] is sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform , certainly more enduring...’ (Gurein, 199)

Tillie Olsen through her work *Silences* (1978) urges to hear women’s voices and calls the silence of victims as the silence of the centuries as to how life is ... [for women]. Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre or Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay are such quiet characters who best exemplify the downtrodden and undignified condition of women. Women have been striving to break through the barriers of discrimination, oppression and of attaining a selfhood, the essentials to empower woman.

Discrimination is a major impediment en route for the growth of critical consciousness of women in our society. It is through the development of clear conscience bereft of dogmatic beliefs and ideologies that a woman can choose to

live with dignity in a righteous manner. In the present scenario the need is to set new benchmarks to be attained by augmenting our efforts in a new direction so as to empower women. This can be initiated by adapting stern measures, implementing them thereby bringing about a change in the society.

III. STRATEGIES ADOPTED FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN

Education is central to the process of women empowerment as it seeks to build a critical consciousness, analytical thinking, knowledge and skills to act for change. Only then a new woman of twenty-first century can emerge. Educated women can contribute more to the economic and political life of their countries, while illiteracy holds back economic development. Literacy acts as a bridge to combat poverty and related issues like unemployment. Female illiteracy is invariably higher than male illiteracy. Today there are five hundred and thirty eight million illiterate women in developed countries and six hundred and forty million illiterate women in the world.

According to UNICEF two third of the world population comprises of women, a fact concluded at the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in the year 1995, Beijing. Many countries committed to achieve full literacy by the year 2000 but the targets are still not met. Kofi Annan the then Secretary General of the organization observed:

"Literacy is a platform for democratization, and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. Especially for girls and women, it is an agent of family health and nutrition. ...everywhere literacy along with education in general is a basic human right" (web, Kofi Annan's International Day message).

Education can bring about a qualitative change in the life of a woman and can empower her in a real sense by making her economically self-reliant and socially aware of her own dignified existence. The edification of women is a pre-requisite for women empowerment. Educated women must come together in large numbers on a single platform to fight against the practices of dowry, child marriages, widow remARRIAGES, domestic violence and sexual harassment. The reality is that these issues still mark the lives of young Indian women. The whole process of women empowerment is vested in the cycle of power and control operated by men's tyrannical hegemony which is deep rooted in our patriarchal society. Women must strive to deconstruct the notion of power by assimilating audacity to fight back against the chauvinistic attitude of the society.

The pervasive concept of power in our society is male dominance and as Kate Millett believes that "the essence of politics is power" (Gurein ,199), this power mechanism which governs every relation between men and women is one of the major cause for impeding the development and progress of women in the society.

In an effort to streamline gender disparity a move by rural and modest woman Bimla Devi, 57, of Basuda village in Rewari district of Haryana is worth mentioning. She along with other womenfolk mobilized the small village people to organize them into a 'sangathan' to take collective actions against issues affecting women's well-being. It is to be noted that Haryana in India has the lowest gender ratio in the country with 861 women per 1,000 men, according to the

2001 census. The state also tops in the list of crimes committed against women, like honour killings, female foeticide and dowry. Formation of such 'sangathans' at village level are stepping stones for measures taken against women empowerment. Bimla Devi revealed that networking alongwith other sangathans in the district they have attempted to prevent female foeticide on an average dealing with 15 to 20 cases a month. Their group helps in preventing gender-specific abortions and in spreading awareness about gender equality. Many a times they fail in their endeavours for the reasons that: "the preference for the male child is so strong that no amount of reasoning or threats make any difference to the errant family"(Foeticide Fighters, The Tribune).

Another notable step of such sangathans is related to the practice of dowry for which they feel that women need to be sensitized more than men. The practice of buying and displaying dowry items, which was a ritual in Haryana, has stopped because members of these sangathans have started boycotting such marriages where the practice of dowry is involved. We must take cognizance of these women who relentlessly campaign and fight for women's cause.

Female infanticide is on rise and much has been done to save the girl child. The Pre- Natal Diagnostic Technique Act (PNDT) which was passed in 1994 could not achieve what it was proposed to do. The act was introduced to detect fetal abnormalities but it is misused for sex determination.

Andrew Symonds, while speaking on the International Women's Day, 8th of March 2003 expressed that men and women are equal and that they should enjoy equal rights irrespective of caste, creed, religion and region. He proclaimed that 'Women Rights are Human Rights. This endorsement of the equal rights of men and women is central to a democratic society and also proves to be a cornerstone for women empowerment. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Indian Constitution provide safeguards against all forms of discrimination. Our Constitution also grants equality to women and directs and authorize the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. In a survey it is found that if more concerted efforts are made, gender equality targets might not be met by 2015.

The most pervasive human rights violation that we know today is violence against women which devastates their lives, stagnates the community and retard the development of nation. This violence is disguised in many forms, in the form of violence at home labeled as domestic violence, sexual harassment at workplace, sex abuse of girls in schools, harassment of NRI brides deserted by their husbands, murders in the name of honour killings and latest but not the least femicide i.e. killing of women by women. In a startling data available on violence against women, 70% of women experience physical or sexual violence from men in their lifetime. On an average women aged 15 and 44, acts of violence causes more deaths and disability than life threatening diseases like cancer and road accidents.

In the year 2007, 22 women were killed each day in dowry related deaths in India. The plight of women in India is such that a crime is committed against a woman every

seven minutes. Every fifty five minutes a woman is raped, every twenty six minutes molestation take place, every forty five minutes a woman is kidnapped and every hundred minutes a dowry death occurs. In countries like South Africa a woman is killed every six hours. The need of the hour is to seek measures against such crimes. In a national conference held in Mysore it was observed that as compared to the past when women remained docile, the present day women is more conscious about her rights and speak out against such atrocities. To empower women the contemporary trends of the society are heading in the right direction which can streamline every concerned area.

TABLE I. CRIME AGAINST WOMEN

Source:<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2012/20090922/main6.html> (Chitleen Kaur)

Rapes victims	298
Dowry Deaths	85
Murders	145
Suicides	96
Molestations	195
Attempt to Rape	39
Kidnapping	453
Attempt to Murder	44

On the bases of data collected by the Punjab police on crimes against women, within the short span of seven months there was a sharp increase in the number of crimes against women. Around four million women and girls are trafficked annually. In the USA a woman is raped every 90 seconds. In the figures revealed by Delhi police every 18 hours a girl is raped in Delhi and molested every 14hours. Shockingly in the crime-prone capital of our country the sufferers are below the age of 25 yrs. Delhi.

TABLE II. DELHI'S RISING CRIME GRAPH

Source: <http://www.India Today. Online Edition. Updated 19:03IST.January 7, 2011>.

CRIMES COMMITTED	YEAR -2009	YEAR-2010
Heinous Crimes	1,948	1,969 ↑
Murder	527	519 ↓
Kidnapping	2,408	3,074 ↑
Rape	459	489 ↑
Molestation	528	585 ↑

As per the statistics provided by the Hindustan Times for the Mumbai city crimes against women have doubled in the year 2013. According to the statistics the numbers of cases registered till the month of July this year were 1,723 as against 753 such offences registered last year. A sharp rise is also visible in the rape cases which recorded a rise of 100% for the month of July (224 cases this year as compared to 111 cases reported last year). Startling revelations show that out of these cases 135 involved minors. The highest increase in number was recorded in cases of molestation under IPC section 354 (outraging the modesty of a woman) which rose by 300%, from 215 cases in the first seven months of last

year to 635 cases this year(2013). The cases of kidnapping also saw a rise of 65% .

Violence against women and girls constitutes a widespread violation of human rights and limits the empowerment process. Due to lack of reliable data it is difficult to figure out the exact number of cases of violence against women. While many countries focus upon providing support to women by imparting knowledge through workshops and organizing other means of spreading awareness , primary concerns in the present scenario should be given to preventive measures and shifts in cultural and societal norms along with significant institutional change regarding legislative measures.

IV. PROTECTING WOMEN'S RIGHT

In the past fifty years, various international human rights organizations have been focusing on promoting and protecting women's right. The United Nation has acknowledged that women's rights are synonymous with human rights. Many national and international movements have raised their voices against abuse and violence against women. In the year 1979, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The convention emphasized that discrimination and attack on a women's dignity violates the principle of equality of rights.

On the basis of recently available data, in the Asia pacific countries the index of legislation on violence shows that Hong Kong , China is the only economy with full legislation in areas like gender-based violence, discrimination against women; while the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Islamic Republic f Iran and Afghanistan have no legislation in such matters. In number of cases legislation is being planned, drafted or reviewed. It must be noted here that a number of laws have been passed for women but laws alone are not enough to protect and empower women. There are twenty six various laws enacted for women but to safeguard their interests, the need of the hour is to acknowledge the rights of women, by eliminating gender disparity and by securing a safe and dignified position for women in society. The atrocities against women can then be curbed down.

The empowering process addresses all structures of power in society as it is the societal structures that compel women to subordination, subservience and dependence on men and they are caught in the web of relationships. When we refer to relationships , marriage as an institution is held supreme among all relationships and in the contemporary world it has become one of the most important and sensitive relation that exists between a man and a woman. Violence within homes has remained a taboo topic but today it is openly and audaciously discussed in the general public. It is gaining grounds in the name of Domestic Violence wherein violence is inflicted on women; it puts the conscious mind in a dilemma and put restraints on her life, paralyzing her life entirely.

The Protection of Women from violence Act, 2005, which became effective from October 26, 2006, recognizes domestic violence as a punishable offence. Violence as defined in the act refers to any type of violence which is physical or sexual, psychological, verbal or emotional and

economical. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 laid down stringent rules to prosecute men involved in cases of wife beating, harassment or any type of insulting behavior which disturbs the physical or psychological well being of a woman at home. The new law empowers the victims to seek help through the magistrate and can get women protection officers.

It must be noted here that domestic violence has its own parameters and the everyday disputes between husband and wife does not come under the purview of domestic violence. The elitist prejudices associated with this type of violence also need to be deconstructed. Generally women who are professionally more successful than their husbands are forced to tone down their achievements as it hurts the male ego in our patriarchal society. The silence conspired at home which acts as a slow poison for women is very dangerous. It is this silence which holds back the resurgence and breaks up in unnatural ways.

A breakthrough, an NGO campaign of ‘Bell Bajao’ in the year 2008 was a bold step to break this uneasy silence. It worked through television, radio, online and print media to awaken the society from the deep slumber and to transform attitude towards women so that they can realize their true potential and live their lives with respect and dignity. In the words of Lord Denning: “...a woman feels as keenly; think as clearly as a man...she in her spheres does work as useful as men do in his....she has as much right to her freedom to develop her present to the full as men. When she marries she does not become the husband’s servant, but his equal partner. If his work is more important in the life of community her’s is more important in the life of the family, neither can do without the other, neither is above the other or under the other. They are equals”. (Denning, 194-195)

Domestic Violence has now become a human rights problem that exists across border as well. In United States more than three women are murdered by their intimate partners every day, and one out of four women is reported to be a victim of domestic violence. In the United States the month of October is nationally recognized Domestic Violence Awareness Month and several public awareness campaigns are organized related activities are undertaken. ‘Standing Silent Witness’ hours are observed wherein men and women line up with slogans acknowledging someone who has faced domestic violence. Survivors of domestic violence join together to remember those who have died because of domestic violence during ‘Remembrance Days’ (Mallika Kaur, 11)

All the efforts for empowering women should be directed towards sensitizing the society about the intrinsic and indispensable role of women in the existing world. We must look up to the present day role models like Idira Nooyi, Chief Executive, PepsiCo; Chanda Kochhar, Chief Executive, ICICI bank; Sri Indrawati, Minister for Economy and Finance, Indonesia and Queen Raina of Jordan. Besides earning a name in the world’s top ten most powerful women their success stories are an example to the Indian women for the immense strength and will power exhibited by these lady icons. Women are liberating themselves from the demands of the family and work and are trying to find a life beyond home. The emerging trends depicts that women are pursuing individual passions and trying to find little space for

themselves sans husbands and children. The GenNext women are expressing their individuality, like Sumitra Senapaty, who found the Wonderlust club for wanting to travel alone or Mumbai based Piya Bose who runs the Girls on the go club. Gone are the days when William Shakespeare’s off-quoted “Frailty thy name is woman” was used to describe them as fickle-minded and weak. To eradicate the major problems hindering the empowerment process the root cause must be dealt with. Self-realization along with a cultural shift is required so as to meet the challenges of the empowerment process.

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